
TRADITIONAL RURAL SELF-GOVERNING SYSTEM OF THE GAROS IN TRIPURA: A STUDY

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Introduction

In Tripura there are nineteen tribal communities who constitute about one-third of the total population of the State. They have similarities as well as differences with respect to language, religion and a number of other ways of life. The self-governing institutions were different in different tribes, but, they were almost self-sufficient in their working and solving problems of social, administrative and judicial nature. Their social, economic and political lives were guided by the age-old customs enforced by those organizations.

In ancient Tripura, there were indigenous democratic institutions like Panchayats in which people would participate for discussion, deliberation and solution of problems. Those institutions were *sui generis* by origin. Justice in those self-government institutions was cheap, direct, immediate, face-to-face and simple. Though the history of Tripura had come across various ups and downs but those institutions atrophied, but did not wither away completely. Those rural self-governing institutions survive even today in the peripheral zones, hills, and tribal settlements of Tripura. A glimpse into the village administration of the tribal communities of Tripura, will give a fairly clear idea of this institution.

The village administration and governance system of the Garos are unique in nature since time immemorial. They are held together by social, political and religious bonds within the village unit. Every village is an independent and self-contained administrative unit. In Garo village, administration is democratic by nature and it is as old as its society itself. Each Garo village is democratically administered by a traditional village council headed by a *Nokma*.¹ The *Nokma* also known as *Aking Nokma* and the village council was the earliest administrative systems of the Garos.² Administration is indigenous and independent.

Origin Of The Word 'NOKMA'

The word '*Nokma*', in common parlance, means a 'rich man'. But it has two literal meanings. First, '*Nok*' means 'house' and '*ma*' is both an affix and suffix, which in some context means 'big'. Thus, according to this etymology, *Nokma* means a 'big house'.³ Though it is used to refer to the man of the house, it carries some meaning as the house of the *Nokma*'s is generally bigger than other houses of the village.

Secondly, the word '*ma*' means also 'mother' and in this sense, it means the 'mother of the house'. Though it variably refers to the man of the house, but since the man owns the

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house and the household property in the name of his wife and her clan, this etymology also conveys some practical meaning. Thus, though the *Nokma*, that is, the man is theoretically the owner, the actual owners are his wife and her clans. As the head of the clan, the *Nokma* is only a custodian of the lands and property of his wife and her clan.⁴

Each Garo village community is an autonomous political unit, the head of which is the *Nokma*.⁵ The office of *Nokma* has the intrinsic importance from the point of view of the Garo organization. It is the pivot of the village organization, through which the basic network of the entire Garo society is woven. In fact, the *Nokma* plays the leading role as the central figure in the village activities and externally represents the village.

Nature Of Office

The office of the *Aking Nokma* is centralized one, but it does not operate on the principle of one-man management. It has no fixed time-schedule, it has no fixed period of working; it carries no profit, no salary. It is looked after by a council of village elders. The number of the members of the village council is uncertain and inconstant. But one thing is certain, the *Aking Nokma* and the members of village council must be member of the Garo society by birth.

Power And Functions Of The NOKMA

The *aking nokmaship* is an important political institution of the Garo society. It is a package of power and function; it is a bunch of responsibilities as well as risks. It is the core of the traditional Garo polity.

The *Nokma* exercises various powers, and discharges various functions and enjoys a few privileges. These power and functions and privileges are derived from custom, conventions and experiences of the Garo society. The power and functions and privileges of the *Nokma* may be summed up thus.

Financial Power

It has to be reiterated that *aking* is a very big, uneven, rough land, and that the land is put to use through subsistence economy, and that shifting cultivation is their traditional means of food production, and further that it is a common land of all the members. No member can claim permanent and hereditary right over any part of this very big ranch. Every member of the village has the right to cultivate the village land. As a rule, the village land is divided into several parts on the basis of annual rotation of jhum cultivation. Every year one of these parts is distributed to each household according to the number of its members. The share of the *Nokma*'s family is allotted in the same way as that of the other families.⁶ Thus, land administration is carried on by the *Nokma* and the council of village elders in accordance with customary laws.

The *Nokma* also play a ceremonial role to mark important points in the annual cycle, such as clearing the jungle, planting and harvesting, etc. On such occasions, the *Nokma* act as ceremonial leader, performing sacrifice and reciting incantations to ensure vigour for the corps and prosperity for the village.⁷ At many of these sacrifices, the *Nokma* is expected to provide the sacrificial animal himself.

Executive Functions

The *Nokma* acted as the executive head of the village. All matters of common interests were discussed at a meeting of the *Nokma* and council of village elders.⁸ As the head, the *Nokma* was to summon and preside over all the meetings of the village. Decisions were

made collectively after which the final decisions was pronounced by the *Nokma*.⁹ He along with the council of elders was responsible for the proper implementation of the decisions taken by them during the meeting. Their decisions on any matter would become law and the villagers were bound to follow it.

Administrative Functions

As the head of administration it was *Nokma*'s responsibility to look after all affairs of the village. He had the overall powers to conduct the affairs of the village according to customary laws. However, in the day-to-day administration of the village, he was assisted by the council of elders. The community, as a whole, possessed sovereign authority but the ruling power was vested in the hands of the *Nokma* and council of elders. In the earlier days of constant animosity among villages and the practice of head-hunting, it was the responsibility of the *Nokma* to protect the village territory. At such time of constant warfare, it was the *Nokma* who had to declare war and conclude peace with outsiders. The village depended on the capability of the *Nokma* in matters of defense and safety of the people.¹⁰

Moreover, it was the *Nokma* who had to deal with outsiders in the village. He would enquire the purpose of the visit of visitors. If it was for a purpose of great importance like a message sent by the stranger's village to have good relations or of obtaining redress of wrongs committed by the villagers, the visitor would be welcomed and shown great hospitality till the village council assembled. It is the sole responsibility of the *Nokma* to discuss the matter with council of village elders and give final decisions.¹¹ Then the stranger would be allowed to go back his way. The *Nokma* was also the custodian of cultural calendar. The dates of all village festivals and other occasions were fixed and announced by the *Nokma*.¹² Administration was based on customary laws and practices that reflected their ancient wisdom and ability to manage their own affairs. Therefore, the *Nokma* and council of elders were also expected to be conversant and well versed with customary laws and practices.

Judicial Functions

In olden days, there was no separate court to deal with civil and criminal cases. Under such circumstances, cases like adultery, theft and murder, etc. were dealt by the *Nokma* who acted as a judge. However, such cases were usually settled at a meeting of the *Nokma* and council of village elders. Whenever the presence of the village elders was necessary, they were called to participate or observe the proceedings. The *Nokma* presides over the meeting. After hearing from both the disputing parties, the *Nokma* finally announce the verdict in consultation with the council of village elders.¹³ The *Nokma* is required to be well versed in customary laws and traditions. There is no scope for further appeal against their decisions. The *Nokma-in-Council* is like the Governor-General-in-Council in literate society.

In simple cases, justice was quick, visible, on the spot and cheap. The criminals and the disputants could hardly escape the eyes of the *Nokma* and village council. Yet false allegations and perjury would take place. In that case, the *Nokma* and council would resort to oaths and ordeals.¹⁴

Village Council

In every Garo village there was a village council. It is a decision making body of the village. It was constituted by men of caliber and integrity. Such men had considerable influence in the society. Generally eldest male members of the village constituted the council to assist the *Nokma* in administration and decision making process.¹⁵ The council was drawn from each clan or group of clans, whether big or small for the successful working of democracy in the village. The council members were neither elected nor appointed by the people but were chosen by their own clansmen.

Basis of membership and composition

There was no fixed rule or custom to regulate the membership or composition of the village council. It depended on how the *maharis* were involved in any dispute. If it relates to any member of the principal female's (*nokma's* wife or *nokna*) *mahari*, the council was predominated by her *chra*. If the disputes relate to any member of the *Nokma's mahari*, the council would consist of the *Nokma's chra* and the *chawaries* (sons-in-law), besides the *chra* of the *Nokma*.¹⁶ No limitation in respect of the degree of blood relationship is imposed. The maternal uncles of both the sides, that of *Nokma* and his wife, are held in highest esteem in that council. In case of *inter-aking* disputes, elders of the *aking* are led by the respective *Nokmas*, and the disputes are settled to the '*Jigmachangga*' (War Council).¹⁷

Functions Of The Village Council

The Garos village council is convened when circumstances necessitate. Generally, council meeting are held near a *nokpante* (Bachelor Dormitory). A small meeting of *nokpante* and a few elders could, however, be held inside the *nokpante* where the *Nokma* presides over the meeting.

Village council, no doubt, had great voice in deciding the village affairs. It is the *Nokma* who carries out their instructions and enforces village council's decisions. The council give instructions for war and defense, executing administration, concerting action with the other village states, distributing lands to the residents, fixing dates of festivals and programmes, initiating pieces of legislation and looking after other welfare works with the help of *Nokma*. The village council is sub-divided into two councils, viz. *Mela-Solbonga* and *Jigma-changga*.¹⁸

The *Mela-Solbonga* consisted of the adults from all the *maharis* and was convened for disposing of *inter-mahari* disputes, initiating legislation, executing administration, concerting actions against rival *machongs*, distributing lands, fixing dates of festivals and deciding any other issue affecting the *machong*. It was a General Assembly of the people and its proceedings were held in open fields and every member had the right to express his views.¹⁹

The *Jigma-changga* on the other hand, was the war council which decided all questions of war and peace with the active male inmates of the *aking* including the resident of son-in-laws. It was also responsible for imparting training to the youths in war and defense technology. The inter-clannish feuds were frequent in former times and the war councils were obviously powerful organizations to manage all the disputes within their community.²⁰

The Role Of MAHARI

The *mahari* is a democratic institution and formed for the purpose of protecting and maintaining the household property. The Garo custom did not allow the property to be fragmented. An individual could acquire and develop property and use it during his life time and upon his death the same is passed over to the *Nokna* of the family and maintained by her *mahari*.²¹ The Garo democracy thus began from the household organization.

Among all the sub-tribes of the Garos, a village usually contained a number of migrant household originating in other villages. Evidently, the unifying bond between the households in a village was very weak. A villager owned his allegiance first to the *mahari* and next to the village. The *mahari* thus stood against the formation of a strong village authority. Moreover, every male member of the family was sure to abandon his original village and become a member of his wife's family. While marriage relations with the former village came to an end, but his membership of the maternal *mahari* never ceased to exist. A *mahari* thus functioned as a 'commune', while a *machong* was the 'union' of several *maharis*'.²² For all political purposes, however, every *machong* was an independent unit under a *Nokma*.

Every *mahari* had two functional wings: *Chra-pante* and *Paa-gachi*.²³ The first consisted of all brothers, their maternal uncles and great uncles. It was practically a tribunal which took upon itself the responsibility of initiating and carrying through all suits connected with civil, criminal and religious laws as well as regulating marriages and inheritance. The *paa-gachi* aimed at the welfare of the male members of the *mahari* who lived in the distant homes of their wives but looked forward to the support of the *mahari* during distress. It consisted of all sisters and their husband, the aunts and their husbands, the grandfathers and grandmothers. The resident husbands thus joined the *mahari* only in the interest of their married male-in-laws and had no share in the actual affairs of the *mahari*.²⁴

Customary Laws

The traditional Garo society never experienced an established form of government in the modern sense. The society was sovereign and its ethos had both structural and moral force to bind the conduct of the people. The customs and usages that had developed over the centuries, from a remote date of social evolution, formed the code of law to be observed and practiced by the whole community. This code of the Garos could be grouped in three sections: *asimalja*, *dakmalja* and *nima*.²⁵

Asimalja

The *asimalja* is a moral force which restrained a Garo from misdeeds, as the transgressors would be punished by the deities (*Saljong and Susime*).²⁶

Dakmalja

The *dakmalja* covered a wide range and embodied moral, religious, civil and criminal laws, marriage laws, land laws and the laws of inheritance. Any violation of the code involved punishment by the *mahari* with *dai*(fine).²⁷

Nima

The *nima* consisted of some ancient usages which prevailed upon a Garo to behave on certain occasions in daily life.

The customary laws and practices were elaborate enough to meet the social and political requirements. In spite of the matriliney, the custodial and managerial authority was always

vested in men. The oldest man in every family was known as *noknipadot*, meaning ‘great father of the house’, and enjoyed the honour of guardianship over all the members.²⁸ The agrarian economy favoured the joint family system. As a matter of fact, the Garo families were fairly large to undertake jhuming cooperative society in the assigned land (*Agate*) and functioned as a democratic institution. The husband (*segipa*) and wife (*jikgipa*) lived together in the latter’s family and the resident son-in-law obtained partnership in the common wealth through wives and worked together for the welfare of the family.

Politics

What the *gram* (village) had been with the ancient Indians, and *the Polis* had been with the ancient Greeks, the *Aking* was with the Garos. What the *Gram Panchayet* had been with the ancient Indians, and the *Politics* had been with the ancient Greek, the *Aking Nokmaship* was with the Garos.

The theory and practice of organizing a social control mechanism, and managing and directing the multiple public affairs may be defined as politics.

In this sense, there had an applied aspect of politics in the Garo’s traditional village administration and justice. There was a territory (*Akingland*), population (*mahari* families) social control mechanism (*aking Nokmaship*) and a body of customary laws (*Asimalja*, *Dakmalja*, *Nima*). All these factors fulfil the essential condition for the operation of politics among the Garos. Indeed the Garos have kept alive this ancient tradition of politics even today.

Conclusion

The concept of rural self-government is not new and alien to the people of Tripura. It was traced with the life breath of the indigenous Garos of Tripura. The root of the local self-government was laid down to the environmental setting of Tripura and its essence is mixed with the blood and mussels of the indigenous Garos. Village administration of the Garos has been developed from the idea of a close-knit village community to that of an organic base for a three-fold revolution—social, political and economic. The principles, practices and procedures would, strictly speaking, vary from place to place; but they had, broadly speaking, certain similarities reflective of a feudal system. Those institutions were *sui generis* by origin and their structure was simple but solid. Even though the ruling dynasties changed from time to time, there was not much of a change in the nature and degree of village autonomy. In this long period Garo-villages enjoyed a great deal of autonomy in the sense of freedom from the control of the State and village self-government enjoyed more autonomy than they do today, under the Panchayati Raj system. This gave to the Garo-self-government a unique stability and performance.

This primitive system of the Garos worked for time immemorial, but the spread of bureaucratic system and attempts of modernization rang the death-knell of this primitive organization which fell into gradual decay with the beginning of the statutory Panchayats system. With the vicissitudes of history it was changed, shaped, moribund and reshaped but did not wither away completely. However, these Garo self-governing institutions survive even to-day in the peripheral zones, hills, tribal settlements and courtiers in Tripura. These bodies contained in miniature all the materials of modern Panchayats within themselves.

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